

Book reviews

Adler, R. B. and Rodman, G. R. (2009). *Understanding human communication* (10th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-533612-2 (496 pp.)

Communication Science and its latest incarnation Media Studies are often seen as dealing with a trendy but nonscientific field of study. Wikipedia uses Media Studies as its primary example of a ‘Mickey Mouse Degree’ (Wikipedia, 2008); the BBC has described it as “the butt of many a joke about declining standards in academia” (Duffy, 2004); and in German speaking countries Communication Science is described as a trendy field of study (Gappmair, 2008). Given this perception of these sciences in the public eye, it is interesting to see how scholars from this field educate their students. Do they give in to demands to make their subjects merely interesting? Are the books they are using understandable for the general population, or only for an elite of scholars?

Twenty-seven years after its first edition, Adler and Rodman’s *Understanding Human Communication*, is now in its tenth edition. The book claims that past editions have been used by “over half a million students”. The number of contributors is impressive and this is intentional. “Success is not possible without the contributions of many people,” the authors say, acknowledging contributions by more than fifty reviewers, developers of ancillary materials, and editors, including 14 university professors and 18 college professors.

The authors present the book partly as an exponent of “an age when publishing is becoming increasingly corporate and sales-driven” and as a blend of “old school practices with cutting-edge thinking” (p. xix). This presentation is consistent with a glossy appearance, text written with a “reader friendly approach” in mind, “examples on virtually every page (...), a handsome design (...), interesting readings, amusing and instructive cartoons, and stimulating photos” (p. xiii).

So, is this book only good for reinforcing the already existing stereotypes of Communication Science and Media Studies? Or have the authors succeeded in their aim to “present material clearly without being overly simplistic” (p. xxiii)? Because it covers so many subjects, this question is hard to answer, especially since it hardly covers the subject of mass communication. In the index – which has approximately 1500 entries – there are no entries for news, newspapers, radio or television. After all, the authors argue, mass communication has unique characteristics (no personal contact, mainly organizational sources, and governmental and corporate control over the flow of information) and there-

fore “raises special issues and deserves special treatment” (p.6) – meaning the subject is almost completely absent from the book.

What the book does contain is a kaleidoscopic view of social scientific research and its relationship to person-to-person communication. For instance, the book tells us:

- that “divorced, separated and widowed people are five to ten times more likely to need hospitalization for mental problems than their married counterparts” and that “socially isolated people are four times more susceptible to the common cold than those who have active networks” (p. 7);
- that empathy is about understanding other people’s points of view, feeling what they feel, and being concerned about their lives (p. 51);
- that semanticist Hayakawa developed a tool for describing the level of abstraction in messages describing persons, objects or events (p. 82);
- that the pathway to intimacy is roughly the same for men and women, although men seem to focus more on doing things together and women more on talk (p. 182);
- that “when people from different backgrounds get together they (...) often develop better solutions to problems and enjoy themselves more while working together” (p. 246);
- what Hofstede’s categorization of cultures is about (p. 246–249);
- which methods for acquiring power in small groups exist (e. g., “Enhance your attractiveness to group members. Do whatever you can to gain the liking and respect of other members without compromising your principles” (p. 252));
- and how to deal with a hostile audience (show understanding for their point of view and use “appropriate humor” (p. 393)).

The book may thus be relevant to the personal lives of students, it may be an inspiration for our work as scholars, and it certainly is a pleasure to read. Yet, it falls short of discussing theories and research findings in a critical way, and most of all, it is not about the key discussions and theories in the fields of Media Studies and Communication Science.

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